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ABSTRACT

This digest presents details of some of the efforts to improve the clarity of written communication in business and the professions. The digest discusses the Plain English movement; writing in professional schools (particularly law and engineering); writing and the medical profesisons; and the public and professional writing. (18 references) (RS)

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Clear Writing in the Professions

by Stephen S. Gottlieb

In virtually all areas of business, it is essential to communicate in ways that clients, employees, and the public can understand. Advertising appeals must be intelligible, product warranties must be comprehensible, and job instructions must be stated clearly enough to be followed. It is in the interest of the merchant, the advertising writer, and the lawyer to make sure that their writing is clear. Fortunately for those who must read and interpret communication in business and the professions, there have been concerted efforts to improve that communication in recent years. This digest presents details of some of those efforts.

The Plain English Movement

As they have become better informed, members of the public have begun to demand that sales contracts, warranties, and other consumer-oriented documents be written in clear, understandable language (Crandall, Charrow 1990; Collins 1986). Proponents of the so-called "Plain English movement" have sought, through legislative lobbying campaigns and other means, to encourage government and business professionals to clarify the language of these items. In states including New York, such efforts have resulted in statutes requiring that certain kinds of documents be drafted in straightforward language (Sullivan 1986).

Business people are unlikely to take language simplification efforts seriously if their superiors do not participate. For a pattern of consistently clear, understandable communication to take root in a given company, those in the highest levels of management must demonstrate through their own actions that improved communication is a top priority of the entire organization (Williams 1986). At the same time, organizations that embrace plain English appear to benefit from better internal communication and improved public relations (Dorney 1987). Indeed, a genuine belief in honest and responsive communication should be central to a company's values and culture. Plain English is one way to achieve this goal.

Writing in Professional Schools

Because writing is such a critical part of the practice of law, many law schools have worked to strengthen their writing programs. At some of the schools, the Plain English movement has been a central part of legal writing education. For instance, at the Southwestern University School of Law, writing teachers instruct students in principles of revision adapted from Richard Wydick's book, "Plain English for Lawyers" (Meteer 1985).

Communication, as an integral part of legal practice, performs separating, unifying, and prestige functions. Legal language has some of the features of a dialect which has evolved in ways that set it apart from standard English. Those seeking to reform legal communication must realize that there is more to the language of the law than its distinctive lexicon (Charrow, Crandall 1990). Simply replacing every "hereinbefore" and "to-wit" with more generally recognizable, contemporary terms may not be enough to assure that a legal document will be readable. Legal writers also tend to employ such devices as archaic prepositional phrases, the passive voice, and a characteristic set of articles and demonstrative pronouns (Charrow, Crandall 1990).

Woolever (1986) argues that the entire process of legal writing would be shorter, clearer, and more effective if writers would give as much attention to the politics of the rhetorical situation as they do to legal research. This requires: (1) understanding the three dramatic elements in the rhetorical situation (audience, purpose, tone); (2) recognizing how these elements apply to the major categories of legal writing; (3) determining who the audience for each document will be.

In the same vein, Comprone (1991) maintains that student writers can be taught to become rhetorically conscious when instructors involve them in complex considerations of purposes and audiences, on secondary and tertiary as well as primary levels. Organizational report writing, for example, is often directed to a primary audience of managerial decision-makers, a secondary audience of production personnel, and a tertiary audience of, perhaps, marketing or research specialists.

As engineers tend to spend a good deal of their time writing, many engineering schools now either include writing courses in their curricula or integrate writing instruction into existing courses (Hodes 1986). Carnegie Mellon University now offers a Master of Arts in Professional Writing (MAPW) for students seeking careers as document designers in business and government. Through coursework, internships, research, and teaching assistantships, the program seeks to help students (1) refine their writing, reading, and critical skills; (2) understand rhetorical theories underlying composition; (3) understand the structures and practices of English discourse more fully; and (4) comprehend the relationship between

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verbal and visual communication (Jones, Steinberg 1987). Higher education institutions such as UCLA have even instituted workshops to improve the writing of their own administrators (Hartzog 1983).

Writing and the Medical Profession

The medical profession is another field in which the continuing improvement of communications is a goal. Clear doctor-patient communication can be literally a matter of life and death. With that in mind, researchers have examined such subjects as the readability of cancer information pamphlets (Kuiper 1985). Medical consent forms have been analyzed as well. The forms are often so laden with both medical and legal jargon that even educated laypeople cannot decipher them. Scholars have offered specific proposals for improving consent forms (Kaufer 1983). To help doctors communicate more effectively with their professional peers, the University of Florida College of Medicine has instituted a course in scientific writing for its pediatric fellows. The course addresses topics including prose, syntax, writing style, and the construction of scientific papers. In response to strong student interest in writing instruction, the medical college has added an advanced course (Cox 1990).

The Public and the Professions

As members of the public, in their roles as citizens and consumers, have become more educated about products and services, government, and health, they have become more assertive in demanding information about those topics. It is increasingly necessary for business and government leaders to communicate with the public in a manner that acknowledges the intelligence of the average person but recognizes the public's lack of familiarity with the jargon of a particular field. The Plain English movement and business communication research can aid in the process of improving contacts with consumers. The teaching of the fundamentals of clear communication to future business leaders while they are still in school is another very valuable technique for improving the flow of information from business to the public. Students can be taught to view writing as a social act, and to internalize the conventions of good writing. Auburn University's business and technical writing course is an example of programs that employ peer reviews, revision, and audience awareness to achieve these goals (Werner 1987).

In the past few years academic interest in writing in the professions has accelerated, probably in large part because of the multidisciplinary aspect of the field (Kogen, 1989). And many academics are beginning to see that the discipline of professional writing can contribute much to our understanding of writing and communication in general.

"Texts produced by writers in the world of work are not only words and sentences, ideas and information, but also acts of discovery, negotiation, compromise, commitment, creation, persuasion, and control" (Matalene 1989).

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